

HEALTH HAPPINESS AND METEMPSYCHOSIS

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The Art of
James Harold Jennings

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Standing Angel, 1980s – Collection of Ray Kass

This publication is produced in conjunction with the SECCA exhibition

HEALTH HAPPINESS AND METEMPSYCHOSIS

The Art of James Harold Jennings

July 20 through September 28, 2002

Exhibition Curator: David J. Brown

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Acknowledgements and a few notes

This publication and exhibition mark the first retrospective of the legendary artist James Harold Jennings. The reclusive Jennings lived and worked in the Piedmont region of North Carolina where his dazzling, colorful constructions and hand-built environments took shape and were highly collected. Over the course of almost thirty years, Jennings developed his own personal cosmology through a unique integration of words, images, patterning, and symbols.

I never had the opportunity to meet Jennings. He passed on just months before I accepted my position at SECCA in 1999. Shortly after my arrival, Tom Patterson rightly suggested that SECCA would be the perfect venue to organize an exhibition of this driven and creative individual. Patterson's devotion to the artist was like that of many others who I encountered in researching this project. Randy Sewell put thousands of miles on the back-roads of America before happening upon the early stages of James' roadside environments. Sewell realized that the talents of this artist were like few others. For almost two decades, Jennings had many visitors to his roadside studio but preferred to spend his time creating in self-imposed isolation. In realizing this, the attention given to James' business and well-being by his brother and sister-in-law Clyde and Normie Jennings were pure acts of caring and devotion.

Exhibitions such as this one are the result of the work and generosity of many people. I would like to offer my gratitude to the entire Jennings family, especially Clyde and Normie; Tom Patterson and Ray Kass who contributed essays of experience and insight; and executive director Vicki Kopf and the rest of the SECCA staff for believing in the project and doing all those things that they do so well. I also wish to thank the following friends, lenders, and organizations whose contributions ensured the success of this exhibition: Brooke Davis Anderson; Claire Ashby and Dr. Charlotte Brown, Gallery of Art and Design, North Carolina State University; Paul A. Distler, School of the Arts, Virginia Tech; Tom Fairchild; Faye Foster; George and Blake Jacobs; Richard Jacobs; Clyde and Normie Jennings; Ray Kass and Dr. Jerrie Pike; Susannah Koerber, the Art Museum of Western Virginia; Roger Manley; Lynn Melton; Barbara Okun; Ann and William Oppenheimer, and the Folk Art Society; Tom Patterson; Randy and Lee Sewell; Mike Smith; Brian Sieveking; and the Virginia Western Community College.

A man of few words and a man seemingly not of this time, Jennings preferred his solitude and the opportunity to create rather than the hustle-bustle of the modern world. It seems that no one knew him well but everyone has a story to tell. This exhibition and catalogue will give rise to many: from his collection of rebuilt bicycles and the low-tech booby-traps that surrounded his property, and the pressure that he felt to meet everyone's expectations, to his beliefs in psychic powers and the transmigration of souls. As such, James Harold Jennings lives on through the experiences remembered by all of the people who came to know him and by the countless works he created with his sun-up to sun-down, decades-long inventive work ethic. Through those memories and works, he continues to make us smile, sometimes laugh, and reflect upon what life deals us and as a result, the choices we eventually make.

David J. Brown
Senior Curator

A Rustic Art World under the Sun, Moon, and Stars

The Emergence and Singular Artistic Trajectory of

James Harold Jennings

by Tom Patterson

In the summer of 1984 I moved to Winston-Salem to take a job directing an unusual three-year research project for the Jargon Society, poet Jonathan Williams' small publishing house. Williams shared my longstanding interest in the work of self-taught, visionary, "outsider" artists, and during the early '80s we'd teamed up to visit several of these artists in the American Southeast. We talked with them and made notes and photographs, and we both began writing about them and their work. Under the auspices of the Jargon Society, Williams had started a collection of their art.

My job for the Jargon Society was to supervise an ambitious effort we decided to call the Southern Visionary Folk Art Project. I set up an office in Winston-Salem's West End and began applying for grants to fund the project, networking with the relatively small number of other outsider art enthusiasts around the country, and making personal forays across the American South to seek out the kind of vernacular art that was our focus.

To draw attention to our project, I soon conceived the idea of organizing a public exhibition of works by some of the self-taught artists we had recently met or learned about. I enlisted Roger Manley, a folklorist and photographer who lived in Durham, as my co-curator, and the two of us began contacting artists and arranging to borrow works to augment those in the Jargon Society's collection. Negotiating with The Arts Council of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County, we booked one of the galleries at the Sawtooth Building, in downtown Winston, for a month-long exhibition titled *Southern Visionary Folk Artists*, to open in early January 1985.

One Saturday in October '84, while we were in the thick of the curatorial process, I received a phone call from Amanda Winecoff, a weaver in High Point who knew about the folk art project. The day before, she said, she'd been driving home from a visit with a friend in Surry County and had gotten lost for a while on some rural roads south of Pilot Mountain. While attempting to find her way back to the main route, she'd passed some interesting painted wood sculptures installed near the roadside. She'd made a mental note of the location and offered to lead me back to it, if I was interested.

Later that afternoon we set out in my Honda Civic, heading north from Winston-Salem on U.S. Highway 52, then exiting the highway at the King-Tobaccoville exit and turning to the west. At the first paved road on the right, we turned onto a two-lane blacktop and drove north for six to seven miles, traversing the east-west border of Surry and Stokes counties. As the car rounded a sharp bend in the road and we passed an old tobacco barn on the right, Amanda said, "There it is."

And there it was indeed—the little domain that would soon come to be known as James Harold Jennings' Art World.

Bordered by woods, a tobacco field, and the road, what then existed of Jennings'

yard show measured no more than 500 square feet, but it was a lively, eye-catching site. In front of a cluster of playhouse-size buildings made of scrap lumber was a rough scaffolding of wooden poles and planks supporting dozens of whirligigs, windmills, miniature airplanes, and ferris wheels, all spinning and clattering and squeaking in the gusty autumn wind, as well as various painted wood cutouts and sculptural pieces representing elephants, turtles, snakes, people, and other fauna. Made primarily of wood, these objects were painted none too meticulously in shades of bright green, blue, red, and yellow.

No sooner had I steered the car off the pavement in front of this rustic roadside attraction than its creator emerged from the group of small, scrap-wood outbuildings at the edge of the woods. A slight, rail-thin man of indeterminate age, Jennings was dressed in earth-toned clothes, paint-spattered work boots, a knit toboggan cap pulled down over his eyebrows, and cheap plastic sunglasses with rose-colored lenses that clashed wildly with the orange freckles covering his sun-baked face. Strapped around his torso were several leather pouches bulging with paintbrushes, pencils, ballpoint pens, scraps of paper, and small woodworking tools. Anchored to the center of his skinny chest was a portable radio, into which was plugged a wire leading to a set of headphones over his toboggan, which, I would later learn, concealed about three and a half feet of graying red tresses tied in a ponytail and knotted at the top of his head.



James Harold Jennings, early environment, 1985 – Photo courtesy of Randy Sewell

We introduced ourselves and accepted his tentative handshake, and he told us his name. This distinctively garbed, elfin character was obviously a shy, private man, and there was something otherworldly about him. His deep blue eyes resisted my gaze as we talked, but he seemed pleased by our interest, and he invited us to spend as much time as we liked looking at his creations. As we stood there talking with him, I noticed that passing cars would occasionally slow down, and faces would stare from behind rolled-up windows, but no one else stopped to investigate this unexpected rural curiosity while we were there. Jennings was clearly unaccustomed to the attention of strangers, but that was soon to change.

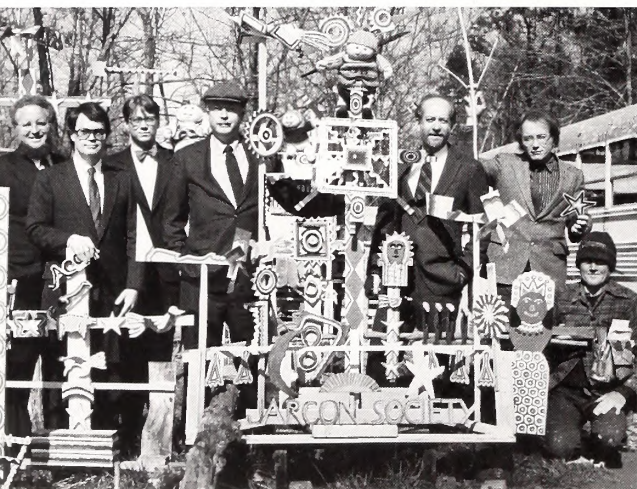
We spent about an hour with Jennings that afternoon, getting a good look at his entire place, including the interiors of the odd little buildings and the decrepit Victorian farmhouse on the hill across the road, where he had lived for much of his life. His only companions were several near-wild cats and kittens. His working studio was one of the scrap-wood structures in his roadside environment—a building no larger than a cramped closet.

Over the next few weeks, Roger Manley and I selected about a dozen pieces of Jennings' work for our *Southern Visionary Folk Artists* exhibition, which also included works by Sam Doyle, Howard Finster, Leroy Person, Georgia Blizzard, St. EOM, Annie

Hooper, Q.J. Stephenson, L-15, and fifteen others. The January 1985 opening marked Jennings' debut as an exhibiting artist, but he declined to attend the reception, no doubt intimidated by the idea of being in an unfamiliar setting where crowds of strangers would be looking at his art and talking to him. And besides, he invariably went to bed with the sun, and the reception wouldn't start until after dark. A few days later, though, his brother, Clyde, drove him in to Winston to see the show, and the next time I saw him I could tell that he was very pleased to have been included.

The Right Place at the Right Time

1985 was the year that so-called outsider art began to register on the radar screen of American popular culture—thanks in no small part to the sponsorship of a few prominent trend-setting rock bands. The cover of the Talking Heads' album "Little Creatures," released in the spring of 1985, reproduced a painting by the famous self-taught artist from Georgia, Howard Finster. Another popular, post-punk rock group, Athens,



Jargon Society and Friends, 1987 (left to right: Roger Manley, Frank Whitney Jones, Thomas Meyer, Johnathan Williams, Thorns Craven, Tom Patterson, James Harold Jennings).

Georgia-based R.E.M., had by that time already used Finster's artwork in a music video, on a poster, and on several album covers. The album covers introduced a wide audience of young music lovers to Finster's art and the larger, emerging field of self-taught art. After making the obligatory pilgrimage to Finster's Paradise Garden, many of these young enthusiasts got word of Jennings and his art and sought him out as well.

Michael Stipe, R.E.M.'s lead singer and front man, came to Winston-Salem with a couple of friends in late January to see the *Southern Visionary Folk Artists*

exhibition, and I took them out to meet James Harold Jennings. An art-school dropout who continued to make art even as he lived the life of an emerging rock star, Stipe was very moved by Jennings and his art. He bought several of Jennings' small sculptures, including a hornet whose body is formed from a twisted vine—very similar to a piece that's included in the current exhibition of Jennings' work at SECCA.

When Stipe was in Winston again at the end of that year on a double bill with the Minutemen, we returned to Jennings' place for a typically delightful visit with him. That night, Stipe walked on stage at the beginning of R.E.M.'s set wearing a paper bag pulled down over his eyebrows in the same way Jennings habitually wore his toboggan.

Michael Stipe and members of other alternative rock bands, such as Winston-Salem's dB's and Let's Active, were among the first of many collectors and curiosity seekers who flocked to see Jennings and his Art World in the wake of Jennings' public debut in the Sawtooth exhibition. Jennings became an overnight sensation in the burgeoning contemporary folk art field, and his pieces started selling as quickly as he could make them, even though—on my advice and Manley's—he had raised his prices substantially beyond the \$3-to-\$15 range he had set for his work when we met him. By the end of the 1980s, his art had found its way into scores of private collections and had been



Untitled, (kinetic construction), 1999 – Collection of Clyde and Normie Jennings.

shown in important survey exhibitions of self-taught art at several Southern museums and university galleries.

The Making of an Artist

Jennings was as frugal with talk as he was with money. When pressed with specific questions that required more than a “yes” or “no,” he kept his words to a minimum. Gradually, though, with patience and some assistance from his always helpful brother, Clyde—his only sibling—I was able to get a rough picture of his life in the years before I met him.

Born April 20, 1931, Jennings spent his formative years on a 50-acre tobacco farm in a community called Purch, near the very small town of Pinnacle. His father, a blacksmith and veterinarian, died when Jennings was only three, and his schoolteacher mother singlehandedly cared for her two sons and managed the farm through the depths of the Great Depression. When Jennings was ten, his mother married a respected elder magistrate, rented out her farm and farmhouse, and moved with her boys into her new husband’s house in nearby King.

Even as a child, Jennings liked to make things. An avid reader of how-to information in journals such as *Popular Mechanics*, he built innumerable radios, but he usually gave or threw them away after completing them. He showed little interest in school, and he dropped out when he was twelve, having made it to the fifth grade. Thereafter, he was schooled at home by his mother, and he spent his teenage years quietly, intent on his electronics manuals and the dictionaries he had also taken to reading, along with various mechanical projects. He had already established a pattern of research and creative activity that he was to follow for the rest of his life.

Although he occasionally worked as a tobacco picker during his childhood and adolescence, Jennings didn’t get his first taste of regular employment until he was in his twenties. The solitary nature of the job as nightwatchman at a local lumber company suited his reclusive tendencies, and he stayed with it for several years. Then, in 1959, his stepfather bought the drive-in theater located directly across the road from their home, and Jennings left his nightwatchman job to be the projectionist—another night job that left him free to work on his various projects by day.

For the next nine years Jennings spent his evenings showing movies at the King Drive-in. The manager was a heavy drinker who regularly shared his stash of sour-mash liquor with Jennings. During the nine years he worked there, Jennings not only picked up his boss’ habit of drinking too much alcohol, but he also became a prodigious consumer of coffee and caffeine-laced soft drinks. He blamed this relentless combination of depressants and stimulants for the panic attacks he started to experience by the late 1960s.

At around the same time, the manager of the King Drive-in began programming “adult movies” three nights a week, and Jennings didn’t approve. In 1968, at least in



Handbuilt House, 1954-58 – Collection of Clyde and Normie Jennings



Untitled (The Chase), mid 1970s
Collection of Randy Sewell

part because of his increasingly unhealthy, night-owl's lifestyle and other work-related tensions, he apparently suffered a nervous breakdown—or, as he put it, “my nerves went bust”—and he quit his job.

When Jennings' doctor was unable to assist his recovery from the collapse, he devised his own therapeutic regimen, swearing off liquor, coffee, “cola pop,” and gainful employment. He never took another job. He also stopped driving, abandoning the Fiat sports car in which he used to tool around King. “I just rode my bicycle and lived very low, where it wouldn't cost me much,” he told me, “and that's how I've been living ever since.”

Now almost forty, Jennings had lived his whole adolescence and adult life with his mother and stepfather in the house across from the King Drive-in. When his aging stepfather died in 1969, however, Jennings moved with his mother back to their family farm near Pinnacle. In 1973, ill and unable to care for herself, she entered a rest home, where she died of cancer the following year, leaving the farm and what remained of her second husband's estate to her two sons. The inheritance provided Jennings with a sufficient income to support his exceedingly modest lifestyle, leaving him free from the pressures of wage laboring. His brother arranged to rent the farm's fields to tobacco-farming neighbors, and Jennings stayed on in the old farmhouse. Lacking electricity, a telephone, or running water, the house fell into increasing disrepair after his mother's death.

Losing his mother was undoubtedly a heavy blow, and Jennings' grief must have been immense. He began his creative activities with paint and wood soon after her death, possibly to help himself recover from the loss. A stone's throw from the farmhouse porch, he set about constructing a group of small, interconnected buildings of scrap wood and metal, similar to the structures he would build nearly a decade later on the other side of the road. He covered this earlier group of essentially nonfunctional structures in metallic silver paint. When he was finished with the outbuildings, he contrived to use the leftover wood scraps for the first crude prototypes of what later became an ongoing, endlessly elaborated series of whirligigs and windmills. Having spontaneously adopted this regional folk art form, he put it to his own idiosyncratic uses, mounting his distinctive wind-activated pieces on poles or atop the roofs of his little silver outbuildings.





Early Jennings environment, late 1980s
Courtesy of Roger Manley

For several years Jennings worked in obscurity. The yard of the old farmhouse where he displayed his pieces in those days wasn't visible from the road, so his creations went unnoticed. Then, in 1976, he was visited by a sharp-eyed passerby—artist and folk art collector Randy Sewell, who lived in Winston-Salem. Happening onto Jennings' place on one of his forays through the countryside in search of work for his collection, Sewell was excited by the whirligigs and other whimsical pieces Jennings had on hand, and he bought several of them. That someone would actually pay money for his creations was a novel concept to Jennings, but he was grateful for the validation of his activities. The neighbors had long regarded him as a harmless crazy, a ne'er-do-well, a homebound hobo who wasted his time on worthless pursuits. He no doubt found it refreshing to meet a sophisticated stranger who felt otherwise.

Sewell began to make regular trips to Jennings' place, often bringing scrap lumber, cans of paint, and money to buy new pieces for his collection. Continuing to visit occasionally even after he moved to Atlanta at the end of the 1970s, Sewell always brought enthusiasm and encouragement, on which Jennings thrived.

Aside from neighbors who occasionally paid a few dollars for a windmill, Randy Sewell remained Jennings' only real audience until that memorable autumn afternoon in 1984, when we showed up at his place. By that time, Sewell's sustained interest had encouraged Jennings' hunger for attention to the point that he had built his new and improved art environment in the clearing across the road from the old farmhouse. This much more visible site was its own advertisement and invitation, and we happened to be among the first to accept that invitation and step into the amazing world of James Harold Jennings' manifest imagination.

Recluse in the Spotlight

The attention that Jennings enjoyed in the immediate wake of the *Southern Visionary Folk Artists* exhibition—the visits from rock stars, art museum officials, and high-rolling collectors—was only the first wave of the enthusiastic reception his work would receive in the art world throughout the remainder of the 1980s and into the '90s. Almost overnight, a steadily growing market for his work had sprung up, and he began to sell his pieces as fast as he could make them. He had clearly arrived, but at a destination he'd never set out to reach. The products of his imagination had catapulted him to a place beyond his own imaginings, and he spent the rest of his life struggling to get his bearings there. Meanwhile, he held his little patch of ground in western Stokes County, rarely venturing more than an hour's bicycle ride from home, and he consistently resisted the worldly temptations that come with fame and fortune. His only concessions to his newfound art-star status were a taste for imported beer and his gradual assembly of a collection of old school buses.

Jennings bought his first bus—a ramshackle, white-painted Blue Bird—from a local church in the late winter of 1985, paying \$500 in cash that he'd earned from recent art sales. With no intention of ever driving it again, he had it hauled to his property and parked alongside his tiny studio and other cramped little buildings. After obliterating the church signs on the bus' exterior with silver paint, Jennings took out the seats and transformed the interior into a kind of gallery-cum-library, where he began to display his smaller, freestanding works and to store the collection of books and other publications that he'd previously kept in the farmhouse attic. These included dictionaries, encyclopedias, National Geographic magazines and other assorted publications, from Dr. Seuss to volumes on witchcraft and the occult.

Within a few months Jennings had completely filled the school bus with art, books,

and other assorted stuff, so he bought another bus and modified it in the same way. Eventually he completely abandoned the old farmhouse, setting up a permanent encampment across the road. He dismantled the little buildings that had been the beginnings of his roadside environment and built a compound surrounded on three sides with old, stationary school buses—seven of them by the time he ran out of room—like covered wagons around a frontier campsite.

The installation of painted wooden cutouts and sculptures that enlivened the compound and gave it its special character was in constant flux during these years. As parts were sold off piecemeal, Jennings added more in their place, struggling to keep pace with the eager collectors who regularly arrived to write their checks and carry off his work.

As his economic circumstances improved, Jennings no longer had to purchase cans of on-sale paint with the labels missing. His palette expanded and brightened dramatically; his color schemes growing increasingly lively and sophisticated. He began making more complex, formally ambitious installations that incorporated cutout symbols, carefully chosen words, numbers, and images of exotic, stylized characters that he identified as Indians, Mexicans, or Chinamen. Several such components were incorporated in the first large-scale installation in his *Art World* series, measuring roughly 8 by 8 by 3 feet, which was first publicly shown in SECCA's *Contemporary Southeastern Folk Artists* exhibition in 1986.

Although Jennings hadn't signed his name to his early pieces, by the time his work was being regularly snapped up by collectors, he took to signing his work on the unpainted reverse or bottom side, adding a trio of stylized cosmic emblems—a radiant sun, a crescent moon, and a five-pointed star. For Jennings, the sun-moon-star motif signified the endurance and relative stability of the larger universe, as contrasted with the fragility and impermanence of individual human lives and our increasingly vulnerable planet.

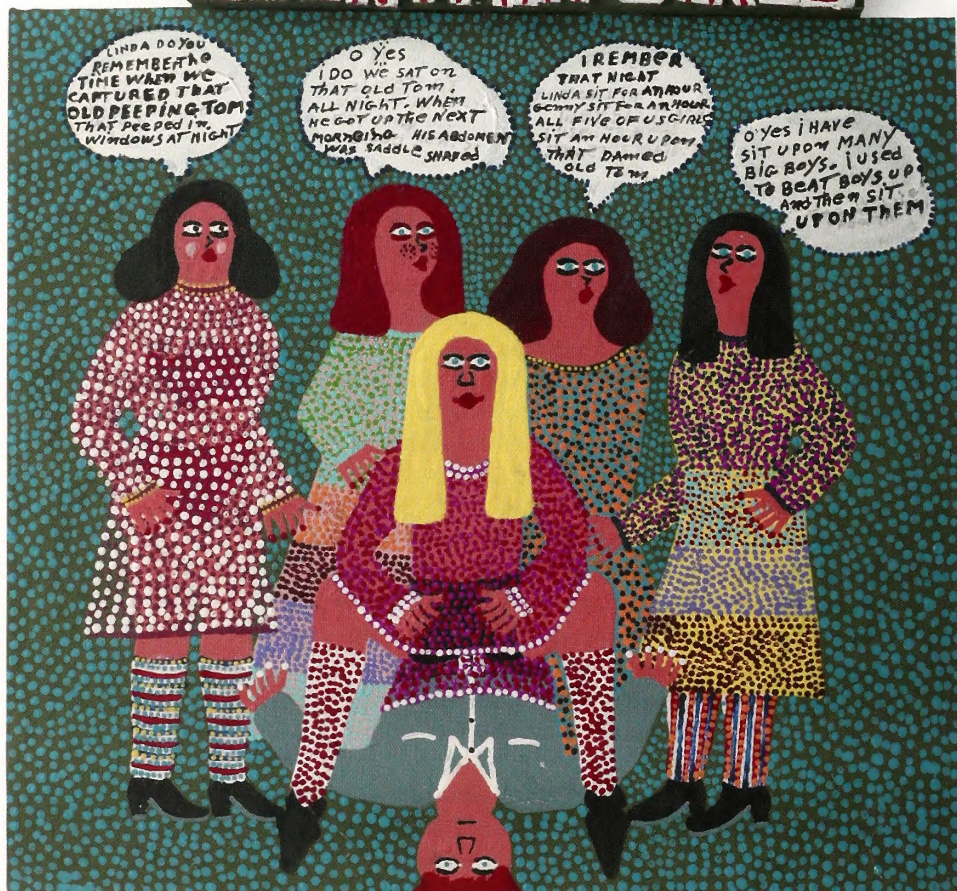
Jennings' brand of homegrown pagan spirituality was far more in tune with ancient shamanistic, astrological, and goddess-cult traditions than it was with the fundamentalist Christianity to which most of his neighbors ascribed. He was acutely aware of and fascinated by his dreams, the concept of out-of-body travel, and experiences of heightened perception. Living outside, as he did, kept him keenly attuned to nature and its more subtle forces.

Among the important developments in Jennings' work on the heels of his art-world debut was his introduction of his *Amazons* (or *Tough Girls*) series in 1986. Jennings' cutout and text augmented images of sturdy, voluptuous women in miniskirts and knee socks who were roughing up hapless red



Untitled (totem), 1980s
Collection of Ray Kass

JAMES HAROLD JENNINGS GETS CAPTURED BY MOUNTAIN GIRLS



James Harold Jennings Gets Captured by Mountain Girls, from the Amazon Women Series, 1990s – Collection of Clyde and Normie Jennings

devils, motorcycle gangsters, and other unfortunate male adversaries immediately caught on with his new fans. The series occasioned countless commissions from collectors who wanted special versions that incorporated their own names and those of their spouses or romantic partners.

The *Amazon Women* series—springing from an unabashed treatment of the artist's own sexual fantasies, nourished by B-movies he'd projected at the King Drive-in and a later tabloid article about female Celtic Amazon warriors—was followed by other series that proved to be similarly popular. His kinetic *Circus World* series featured cutout animals and acrobats that move when you turn an attached crank. He took to wearing his painted plastic-cutout *Celestial Crowns* when he posed for photographs.

Around 1990 Jennings began a series of small, cutout self-portraits in which he became his own icon, depicting himself in stiffly stylized form, wearing one of his crowns and a leather pouch slung over his shoulder, and standing in front of a yellow school bus. At around the same time, he began assembling some of the wood scraps left over from his figural and geometrical cutouts into complex, abstract compositions on which he painted intricate patterns of multicolored dots, dashes, and other tiny markings. These were inspired in part by his fascination with the kaleidoscopic visual patterns that can be generated by closing your eyes and applying pressure to your eyelids—a common children's technique for inducing visions.

The Last Years and Legacy of an “Artist's Artist”

In the latter half of the 1980s, the world that Jennings had resisted meeting on its terms for so many years came to him on his terms, suddenly requiring him to clarify for himself just what those terms were. His gratitude for the respect his art commanded was offset by feelings of vulnerability and pressure to produce for his new market. Suddenly he had people who were depending on him to create—collectors and an increasing number of art dealers who gave him “orders” to make new variations on earlier works or other special pieces they wanted made to their specifications.

Demand for his works was so great that he no longer had the opportunity to assemble the kind of elaborate displays that had enlivened his environment in the mid-to-late 1980s. To encourage speedy production, one collector went so far as to try to nudge Jennings into mass production. He traced figures and geometric shapes from some of Jennings' earlier pieces, cut them out of wood using machine tools, and gave them to Jennings with the request that he paint, sign, and return them.

At some point in the early 1990s, Jennings' feelings of pressured vulnerability began to overcome his gratitude for the attention his work was receiving. He began to experience paranoid fears of predatory exploitation and violation. He posted warning signs along the front of his compound and was increasingly concerned with keeping his firearms close at hand. He began wearing a holstered revolver on his belt, and he let it be known that visitors weren't welcome after sunset, when he customarily turned in for the night. If disturbed after dark, he warned, he would “shoot first and ask questions later.”

After about seven years of transacting business with collectors and dealers in person and on site at his roadside compound, Jennings turned over his business dealings to his sister-in-law, Normie Jennings. Although this development relieved him of some of the pressure, he continued to confront other, more deep-seated problems, including a condition that was diagnosed as clinical depression. His paranoid inclinations were fueled by the radio broadcasts to which he frequently listened, in which fire-and-brimstone preachers warned of an apocalypse coinciding with the approaching turn of the millennium. Despite his consistent disavowal of Judeo-Christian cosmology, such

doomsday predictions unfortunately resonated with Jennings' tendency to worry about impending calamity.

In the first couple of years that I knew Jennings, when I returned after more than a few weeks' absence, he would invariably say, "I've been wondering where you were. I was starting to worry that something had happened." But the steady stream of visitors descending on Jennings by the late 1980s provided him with plenty of company and plenty of work, and eventually he got used to not seeing me so often. My visits became less frequent as the Jargon Society's folk art project wound up its three-year run, and I went on to other pursuits that required me to spread my attention more thinly across broader cultural territory. During most of the '90s I visited Jennings only once or twice a year, and in 1999, when I received the shocking news of his apparent suicide on the eve of his sixty-eighth birthday, more than a year had passed since I'd last seen him.

Now, in 2002, Jennings' place in the late-twentieth-century history of American self-taught art is uncertain. His work has been conspicuously absent from several recent exhibitions that have surveyed the field of contemporary American self-taught art, and he is rarely included in the list of "master outsiders" that have come to preoccupy certain heavily invested collectors and museum officials. Several years ago, at least one major private collector reportedly divested himself of numerous Jennings pieces after another collector convinced him that Jennings was a "simple" lightweight whose art isn't to be taken seriously.

That viewpoint, however, is strongly countered by a consideration of the vast body of work that Jennings produced over twenty-five years—revealing a remarkably rich thematic range, a deft ability to improvise, a seemingly limitless capacity for formal innovation, and a deeply mystical sense of the world. I have talked with countless academically trained artists and critics who cultivated friendships with Jennings and collected his work over the years, and I have heard the same observation from one of them after another, in exactly the same words—that James Harold Jennings was "an artist's artist."

He was indeed.

James Harold Jennings was a uniquely extraordinary artist and human being, and we won't see the likes of him again. It's fortunate that he left so much of himself behind to dazzle, entertain, and enlighten viewers who will never have the opportunity to experience his rare presence.

Biographical Note

Tom Patterson is an independent writer, critic, and curator who has written several books, a number of exhibition catalogs, and many essays and articles about contemporary self-taught artists and their work. He has served in editorial capacities for several contemporary art magazines, most recently the London-based *Raw Vision*, of which he was U.S. editor from 2000 until early this year. He was the art critic for the *Charlotte Observer* from 1992–98, and has written regularly about visual art for the *Winston-Salem Journal* since 1988. He is currently curating a large, group exhibition, *High on Life: Transcending Addiction*, for the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, to run from October 2002 through September 2003.

James Harold Jennings' Art World

A Projectionist's Vision

by Ray Kass

I first encountered the extraordinary art world of James Harold Jennings in the mid-1980s, when I accompanied Jonathan Williams and Tom Patterson on a visit to Jennings' extraordinary and constantly changing roadside art show in Pinnacle, North Carolina, a small place in the shadow of Pilot Mountain. "Pinnacle" struck me as a peculiarly appropriate name for the dazzling environment created by its most famous and notorious resident.

Over the next few years, I made many trips to Pinnacle with my friend and colleague, artist Brian Sieveking, and many of my students at Virginia Tech. I noticed something new every time. Jennings' subject matter changed constantly, as did his artistic style. The level of formal visual development in his work seemed uncannily sophisticated, a relatively uncommon trait among the self-taught "outsider" artists with whom he is usually identified.

Jennings began his life as an artist in the mid-1970s, painting crude images of horses, turtles, carved bees, and a few simplified flower designs onto irregularly shaped sawmill-end boards. By the mid 1980s, these image-oriented works had evolved into complex totemic constructions that customarily featured simplified elements of personal symbolism, particularly images of the sun, moon, and stars. Over time, these

images became a signature identity expressing his works' philosophical scope. He incorporated his primary motifs and designs into increasingly complex assemblages, including moving forms of whirligigs, ferris wheels, and pieces that mixed cut-outs of painted images with symbols and sometimes completely abstract shapes. Ultimately, these evolved into the highly patterned and abstracted bas-relief constructions of his final years.

An eccentric from childhood, Jennings left school at age twelve, but was nurtured and educated by his mother, a schoolteacher and tobacco farmer. His father, a veterinarian, had died when Jennings was three years old. Jennings had only two wage jobs in his life, a night watchman and a movie projectionist at a drive-in theater located across



The Projectionist, 1990s – Collection of Barbara Okun



James Harold Jennings, 1987 – Photo courtesy of Randy Sewell

from his mother's house. Both of these jobs required him to be alert to his surroundings, but they also isolated him in a private environment. The westerns, science fiction, and Hollywood "B" action-adventure movies that he showed at the drive-in were his window on the world.

Jennings' experience as a projectionist gave him a taste of what it means to be an artist. A projectionist must pay careful attention in order to switch reels in a feature film without disrupting the illusion. As he "watches" the movie, in a sense he "creates" the experience of it for the audience. In a subtler way, the operation of the movie projector itself may have influenced his development. A projector constructs a virtual reality out of a multitude of sequential frames—the way assembling a succession of fragments and painted patterns can make a new reality out of scraps.

For Jennings, being a projectionist was more than just a job. He later explained that he quit after the drive-in switched from adventure films

to soft porn and psycho-violence movies, of which neither he nor his mother approved. But the movies had made their mark. His later work draws on movie imagery, such as his series of "amazon" women, which he acknowledged was based on a fantasy movie that he showed at the drive-in.

Although many of Jennings' images are representational, they transcend physical observation. Their deeply subjective origins are as implicitly abstract and symbolic as those of his energetic decorative patterns. His work is laden with cosmology—a personal metaphysics. In Jennings' art world, as in his life, the sun, moon, and stars are the three most powerful forces in the universe, "more powerful even than God."

Jennings was fascinated by the arcane and occult sciences, astrology, epistemology, and the origins and definitions of words—especially old words that were falling out of common usage. He felt like an "outsider" in his own community, confiding to curator Clarissa South that "church-going people were the sort that he was not accepted by."

This, of course, included most of his neighbors. He expressed his personal piety by reading to visitors the definitions of arcane words edited out of newer dictionaries.

The spiritual, even religious, character of Jennings' work underscored his own rigorously moral and fearful frame of mind. These personal characteristics finally evolved into an intense paranoia. During the 1990s, his anxiety was magnified by the approaching millennium, reaching a crisis with his tragic suicide on April 20, 1999.

As Jonathan Williams wrote in his sensitive obituary in *The Independent* in London, Jennings was an example of William Carlos Williams' claim that "the pure products of America go crazy." Jennings' mind sang with the myths and texts of his self-directed learning and his growing obsession with the social calamities that he heard reported daily on the evangelical and right-wing local AM radio stations. Although it sprang from visual associations, Jennings' art world was an alternative reality to the "bad" real world.

Jennings' art embodies rich patterns animated by his awareness of paint, materials, and the artistic process. He understood the energy of pattern and shape and their effect as retinal stimulants. He described seeing patterns in his dreams, or staring at things for a long time, or squinting hard, and then closing his eyes and seeing patterns that inspired his work. He lived far out in the country where the moonless nights are dark and filled with stars, and he gazed for hours at the night sky. He saw an expressive potential even in the negative shapes left over from his cutouts, and he incorporated these painted wood scraps into many of his works. His works can be understood as sophisticated formal abstractions.

An important opportunity for a wider general public to view Jennings' "outsider" art came in 1989 at the North Carolina Museum of Art's exhibition *Signs and Wonders: Outsider Art Inside North Carolina*. For this exhibition, co-curators Roger Manley and David Steel commissioned Jennings to create a painted wood construction of the *Great Seal of the State of North Carolina*. His large piece was installed in the entry gallery of the museum, adjoining a room in which large paintings by Washington, D.C., "color school" masters Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis were clearly visible.

Jennings' vibrantly ornamental piece reinvented the state seal as a bright, wonderfully free symbol that looked perfectly at home hanging adjacent to the two masterworks of American art. Without the influence of the elite worlds of classrooms, museums, and art magazines, Jennings seemed to have developed and even extended the contemporary strategies of the Washington color school and "Greenbergian" formalism. In the company of these highly influential formalist works, Jennings' *Great Seal of the State of North Carolina* looked positively progressive, a logical next step that pushed the envelope beyond the period of Noland and Louis.

Jennings' *Great Seal* reminds me of the work of the eccentric mainstream painter Alfred Jensen, whose highly patterned works became publicly noted in the 1970s. Jensen introduced thick impasto and arcane inscriptions into brightly colored geometric designs as variants on the late modern "formalist project." Like Jennings, he often used design and encryption to allude to ancient systems of divination and arcane science.

But the comparison between Jensen and Jennings can be taken only so far. Although Jensen remained independent and aloof, he was actually a sophisticated "insider" in the exotic New York art world. He believed that his work bridged the gap between the abstract expressionism of the late 1950s and an emerging uneasy minimalist aesthetic. Jennings, on the other hand, was a bonafide "outsider," who developed a comparable stylistic sophistication without any connection to the mainstream art world.

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